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Feisty EPA coordinator stays in the face of Grace

By LYNNETTE HINTZE
The Daily Inter Lake

Paul Peronard is a household name in Libby. He's the David battling the Goliath-like corporate giant, the Moses leading Libby into the promised land. Peronard is on-site coordinator for the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

But Libby residents found out early on he's not a normal federal-government worker. His shaved head and two earrings in one ear stand out in blue-collar Libby, but the people love him.

Residents like to brag about how Peronard nearly came to fisticuffs with a W.R. Grace representative at a recent Community Advisory Group meeting. Peronard shrugs it off.

"They just make me so darn mad," he said.

Peronard was called to Libby in late November last year, after local and national news reports told of asbestos exposure and probable contamination from Grace's former vermiculite mine. He wasted no time in carving out the EPA's niche in dealing with the problem.

To be fair, many other EPA employees have also shepherded the community through the crisis — toxicologist Chris Weis, community involvement coordinators Diana Hammer and Wendy Thomi, among others. But Peronard has been the most visible and outspoken.

He was in Libby last week as cleanup crews "buttoned down" for the winter at the Raintree Nursery, the site along the Kootenai River where Grace screened and loaded vermiculite ore. Workers excavated and stockpiled 80,000 cubic yards, which has been covered until the EPA can persuade Grace to allow the contaminated soil to be hauled to the mine site.

The EPA sued Grace for access to the mine, and the case is still working its way through federal court in Missoula. Grace is hauling asbestos-laden soil from the former export plant to the mine site, but the company refuses to let the EPA do the same for the screening-plant soil.

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Peronard doesn't hide his disgust with Grace over stymying the nursery cleanup. Nursery owners Mel and Lerah Parker were forced to give up their business and are living on a monthly rent and food stipend until a settlement can be worked out and they can return to the property.

"It will take all next summer to haul this out," Peronard said, pointing to the mammoth piles of contaminated soil. "That means the Parkers won't get to start their lives over until a year from next summer."

Peronard is also keeping tabs on Grace's cleanup of the Millwork West site near downtown Libby, the former Grace export plant. Millwork West relocated its retail lumber business to U.S. 2 on Sept. 30, and the planing mill was back in action by mid-November.

All five buildings on the Millwork West site have been cleaned and decontaminated. Crews are now wrapping up excavation.

Alan Stringer, who formerly managed the Libby mine for Grace, has overseen the cleanup.

"I'm fully aware of what's going on every day," Stringer said. "We have another couple of weeks of backfilling to do."

Stringer, western region production manager for Grace in Santa Ana, Calif., has spent most of the last year in Libby. As activity winds down for the winter, he'll return to southern California.

Peronard will continue to be involved with more asbestos testing scheduled for February.

"We want to answer questions about home exposure," he said.

To that end, the EPA will measure asbestos levels in the air when homeowners are vacuuming, dusting or working in an attic. Those measurements will be compared to data collected from stationary air monitors.

Next spring, the agency will create outdoor-dust scenarios in yards and gardens.

It's been difficult for residents to get detailed information about asbestos contamination in homes, because risk-assessment methods are being revamped to zero in on residential contamination.

"The good news is that agencies will be taking a closer look at asbestos with the newer analytical methods," Peronard said. "The bad news is that it's being done at the cost of time and impact to Libby residents."



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